

When L.A. meets Madison

MADISON, WIS. — An art historian might call it a renaissance. A physicist might call it a critical mass. But by whatever name, there are certain factors that lead to an explosion of creativity in a given part of a big city, whether it's Manhattan's SoHo or Milwaukee's River West.

Thomas H. Garver, director of the Madison Art Center, senses just such a buildup of cumulative enthusiasm and energy among the artists who have moved into former commercial and industrial spaces in downtown Los Angeles over the past decade or so.

Shared lives and experiences are part of it. So is a capacity for mutual support and individual hard work.

Put it all together, and you have a group exhibition called "Between the Freeways: The Art of Downtown Los Angeles."

'Futurist excitement'

The show, assembled by Garver, concludes its local run from 1 to 5 p.m. today at the Art Center, 211 State St. It then goes on a two-year tour under the auspices of WAAM — the Art Museum Association.

Its first stop will be the Center for Visual Arts, Normal, Ill., Dec. 8 to Jan. 24. No additional Wisconsin showings are scheduled at present.

"There is a kind of futurist excitement in downtown Los Angeles," Garver told me.

"The Museum of Contemporary Art will be down there in 1984. I think there is a shared kind of spirit and a shared reliability. I couldn't have organized this show as fast as I did if there weren't several artists who were very, very helpful in showing me around and encouraging my interests.

"It's given me a greater apprecia-

tion for what I see as community energy, and a community interest that extends beyond self. No one I invited to be in the show declined. Everyone has sent strong pieces — as strong as possible."

Not unexpectedly, mounting regional Los Angeles works in the heart of the state capital has sparked grumblings among some Wisconsin artists — especially since Garver, like his fellow directors Katherine Mead at the UW — Madison's Elvehjem Art Center and Gerald Nordland at the Milwaukee Art Museum, came to Wisconsin from California.

Defends experience

One Madison publication went so far as to complain about the showing in major gallery space of pieces by "mediocre" L.A. artists.

Garver apparently anticipated such comments. He feels the show is justified not only on the grounds of its inherent energy but also as a kind of exemplary experience for other communities.

"It's happened in New York City and in certain areas of Chicago," he said, "and I'd like to see it happen in other cities. Madison, for instance, has a lot of artists, but I don't see them communicating. [There are] lots of artists who aren't interrelating and communicating with each other, enjoying each other.

"There's a lot to do here," he added. "The artists I've found need, I think, a feedback, and they need encouragement."

Garver said he spends one day a month, "to the exclusion of all else," looking at the work of individual artists.

"This has been rewarding for me and for a number of artists because we have a chance to talk about their

work. It's been basically very positive and encouraging."

Several locally oriented exhibitions are in the offing at the Art Center. A show of the decorative arts in Dane County is in the works, and the third Wisconsin Biennial will be held in 1982 in a gallery currently under construction.

The new, 3,000-square-foot display area is part of an expansion program that includes studio workspace, a center for art education and a 100-seat auditorium.

As for the "Freeways" show, it struck me as pretty well confirming Garver's assertions about a resurgence of related, if not entirely coherent, artistic activity in urban L.A.

No hothouse project, it has undeniable presence, if not a great deal of subtlety, and is unified stylistically by a kind of raw, expressionistic vigor. There is also a pervasive awareness of the expressive potential of language and symbol.

Geometry and funk

Often the participants' concern with urban landscape is tempered by the inclusion of geometric elements. And an infusion of California-style fantasy sometimes takes the whole thing over the borderline into funk.

Some of the more interesting aspects of the show have to do with attempts to bring art to bear on the specifics of big-city living.

Notable here are Jon Peterson's photographically documented "Bum Shelters," which he builds in his studio, then erects in vacant lots. The idea might seem exploitive if it obviously weren't so badly needed — and so enthusiastically utilized — by the city's homeless.

Also noteworthy are Judy Simoni-an's "Double-Negative" — geometric wall paintings, augmented by graffiti,

photographically documented in three stages, from March, 1979, to September, 1980.

Painter Joe Fay is urban, too, but only by implication. His "DC-10 Crashes Into City Hall, 1980," an acrylic on canvas, is just that — a frozen catastrophe, embellished with flowers and flamelike ornamentation.

The house as a machine for living is parodied by Richard Oginz in "Drawing Ship," a mixed-media wheeled vehicle complete with drawing board, seated artist, aquarium, and suspended windows.

Elements of humor

A sense of humor, something relatively rare in these grim times, is also demonstrated in Gary Lang's "Weapons," a mixed-media piece that shows the tools that are ostensibly necessary for survival in the urban jungle. These include an "Urchin Grip," "Rhinstone Slashes Grip" and "Spectral Poker." All are pointedly lethal but gaily colored and decorative.

One of the more interesting meshings of woodlands and sharp-edged urban minimalism is to be found in Woods Davy's "Cortez" (1981), in steel, eucalyptus and paint.

Strangest of the conceptual pieces is Coleen Sterritt's "Loose Shorts" (1979) — a precisely arranged triangle of bamboo tripods, each of which is topped by a painted rock.

The show, funded by a grant from the California Arts Council, by no means convinced me that urban Los Angeles is outstripping the Midwest as a cauldron of bubbling creativity.

One wonders how a similar show, organized from among Wisconsin's finest, would play on the Coast. Probably not too badly at all.

JAMES AUER

PICTURE OF
TOM GARVER →

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Thomas Garver, director of the Madison Art Center